

PEGGY GUGGENHEIM COLLECTION

1948: The Biennale of Peggy Guggenheim
Curated by Gražina Subelytė
May 25–November 25, 2018
Project Rooms, Peggy Guggenheim Collection

“My exhibition had enormous publicity and the pavilion was one of the most popular of the Biennale. I was terribly excited by all this, but what I enjoyed most was seeing the name of Guggenheim appearing on the maps in the public gardens next to the names of Great Britain, France, Holland, Austria, Switzerland, Poland . . . I felt as though I were a new European country.”
Peggy Guggenheim, *Out of this Century*

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the exhibition of the collection of Peggy Guggenheim in the Greek Pavilion at the 24th Venice Biennale. In order to commemorate this milestone event in the history of 20th-century art, the **Peggy Guggenheim Collection** presents an homage exhibition *1948: The Biennale of Peggy Guggenheim*, curated by Gražina Subelytė, Assistant Curator, installed in the Project Rooms from 25 May to 25 November 2018.

Peggy Guggenheim’s participation in the 1948 Venice Biennale was a landmark event. Not only was it the first display of a comprehensive modern art collection in Italy after two decades of dictatorial regime, but also the first showing of Guggenheim’s collection in Europe following the end of the World War II and her move to Venice from New York, where she closed her museum-gallery Art of This Century (1942–47). Founded in 1895, the Biennale had interrupted its exhibitions in 1942 due to the war. It resumed its activity in 1948, when it began to play an international role on the modern and contemporary art scene. In 1948 (June 6–September 30), the Biennale presented an exhibition on Impressionist masterpieces organized by the art historian Roberto Longhi, a retrospective of Picasso’s works from 1907 to 1942, and a show in the main pavilion dedicated to artists such as Otto Dix, Karl Hofer and Max Pechstein in order to restore dignity to the art branded as “degenerate” during the Nazi years. The exhibition of the collection of Peggy Guggenheim—invited by then Secretary General of the Biennale Rodolfo Pallucchini, on the advice of the artist Giuseppe Santomaso—was an unprecedented event for the Biennale. Europe had yet to see a collection so representative of “non-objective art” and of the avant-gardes, from Cubism and Futurism to Dadaism, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. Though including a few Italian artists—Giacomo Balla, Massimo Campigli, Giorgio de Chirico, and Gino Severini—the collection included the most representative abstract and Surrealist artists, such as Jean Arp, Costantin Brancusi, Alexander Calder, Max Ernst, Alberto Giacometti, Kazimir Malevich, Antoine Pevsner, besides the young Americans who had never exhibited outside the United States: William Baziotes, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still. Guggenheim’s collection surveyed the most contemporary art styles, thus aligning with the Biennale’s aspiration for historical completeness. Guggenheim exhibited one hundred and thirty six works of art in the pavilion of Greece, then ravaged by the civil war. Over twenty works of art would later be donated to various museums around the world, including the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome, the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco, the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design, the University of Iowa Museum of Art and the Art Museum of Seattle.

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1948: The Biennale of Peggy Guggenheim will partially recreate the setting of the pavilion through documents, photographs, letters, and for the first time a three-dimensional model of the pavilion installation. The layout had been designed by the distinguished Venetian architect Carlo Scarpa, who collaborated with the Biennale from 1948 to 1972. Selected works from the Peggy Guggenheim Collection will be on view in the exhibition together with others donated by Guggenheim, such as *Composition n. 113* (1939) by Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart and *Composition* (1936) by Jean Hélion, now in the collection of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. These gifts have not been seen in Venice since the 1950s. In 1948 the presentation of the collection offered the European public the opportunity to catch up with the latest artistic developments and to see the New York artists who would dominate the art scene through the 1950s. The present exhibition will therefore offer the opportunity to re-examine this watershed event in Guggenheim's career and in the history of the Biennale.

Guggenheim's exhibition created confusion and disorientation among critics and the public. The 1948 press titled: "The Exhibition of Wonders or Guggenheim's Noah's ark?," and "Apologies, We Laughed." Suffice it to say that, although Guggenheim's collection was featured in the Biennale catalogue, she also published a small, separate catalogue to sell in the pavilion. Its black cover displayed a drawing by Max Ernst. The catalogue included a preface by Guggenheim, a text by Bruno Alfieri, and it was enriched with testimonies by Herbert Read, Jean Arp and Max Ernst.

The Italian President Luigi Einaudi and the U.S. Ambassador to Italy, James Dunn, both paid homage to "Mrs. Guggenheim's" Pavilion. Among other illustrious visitors was Bernard Berenson, the elderly art historian of Italian Renaissance art. His writings had been Peggy Guggenheim's guide when she had first visited Europe. He disliked modern art, but appreciated Pollock's paintings which "were like tapestries for him." A photograph by Lee Miller captured a joyful Guggenheim next to art critic Lionello Venturi. Miller went on to described Guggenheim's pavilion as "the most sensational" of all in British *Vogue*.

In conjunction with the 70th anniversary of the exhibition of Peggy Guggenheim's collection at the Venice Biennale, for the first time in the last twenty years, all eleven works by Jackson Pollock that Peggy Guggenheim chose to keep for her own collection are on view in the galleries of the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni. Five of these were displayed in the 1948 Pavilion together with the other masterpieces of the historical avant-gardes.

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